

Student Life
in Catholic
Higher Education:
**Advancing
Good Practice**



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CHAPTER 21

Genuine Collaboration Between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs

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This chapter introduces an authentic, distinctive collaboration between student affairs (SA) and academic affairs (AA) in Catholic higher education, differentiated from basic campus partnerships. We share a concrete example, followed by what we have learned, as we work to institutionalize this distinct relationship on our Jesuit campus at Canisius College. This effort is a work in progress and requires constant commitment and determination to maintain a sustainable, collaborative effort between SA and AA. Within Catholic higher education, the value of community and the tradition of fostering the development of the whole person positions SA and AA to effectively apply an integrated approach to fostering a seamless learning experience for our students.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

In spring 2013, faced with a declining undergraduate population and first-to-second-year retention rate, along with a trustee-funded institutional analysis from an external consultant, the president of Canisius College commissioned a Retention Task Force. Senior leadership strongly believed that for a Retention Task Force to be successful, both SA and AA needed to be heavily invested. The authors, then the dean of students and the associate vice president for academic affairs, were appointed by the president as co-chairs of the task force.

The task force included key administrators from SA and AA, as well as many faculty members, 50 members in total. The president charged the task force to conduct a comprehensive study into the college's performance on retention and graduation rates to determine the root causes of the problem and develop a plan for improvement. Through weekly meetings, task force members painstakingly reviewed data, listened to one another's ideas, discussed, wrote, addressed the president's charges, and submitted our report. The final recommendations were comprehensive and inclusive. All were accepted and acted upon, including creation of the Griff Center for Academic Engagement, which reports jointly to the vice presidents for SA

and AA. The Griff Center realigned the organizational structure to integrate services (freshman and transfer advisement, accessibility support, career services, veterans support, new student orientation, and tutoring) that are functionally related from the perspective of the student, eliminating silos and creating a seamless, effective, and engaging experience for all students. During the planning process, throughout the implementation, and since the creation of this integrated service center, we learned important lessons worth sharing with other Catholic colleges and universities.

CLARIFY THE GOAL

As individuals from different areas of the institution come together, the goal of the effort must be clear to all. Each member of the group brings his or her own important, although limited, perspective. Each must understand how their own experience and knowledge can contribute to achieving the goal, and that can only occur if the purpose of the effort is specific and clear. Therefore, as simple as this step seems, distribute the goal(s) in writing to the group. Review them at the first meeting and post them in a shared space. Remind the group of the ultimate goal(s) as often as needed to keep all moving in the right direction, to avoid tangents that devour time, and to accomplish the goal within a reasonable timeframe. It is easy for a group of thoughtful and dedicated individuals to become distracted as conversations progress and ideas are offered. Allow time for these cross-divisional conversations, as they can be very valuable in building and strengthening the relationship between SA and AA, but remain focused and respectful of time. Stakeholders will be more likely to agree to serve on a committee if they know they can rely on leadership to value their time and accomplish the goal.

COMMUNICATE AND EDUCATE

Be sure you are communicating with, and educating, stakeholders across divisions throughout the process. When appropriate, widely share the data, analysis, and conclusions. Offer updates on progress that are easily accessible. How important this is — and how wide you should cast the “information net” — depends on how many areas of the institution may be affected by the solution that is finally recommended. The effort to communicate and educate is particularly important if the solution is likely to require many individuals (including faculty) to change the way they currently do their work. Engage senior leadership where appropriate and request they include updates on the project in their communication with constituents. Otherwise, failure to communicate and educate, as well as competing priorities across the institution, may result in tremendous challenges during the implementation phase.

DEVELOP ALLIES

Develop allies while collaborating across divisions. Many of us serve on numerous committees. Be attentive to the language faculty use and the concerns they raise. Most are very interested in student success but are not necessarily aware of the role, or work, of their colleagues in SA. Be sure to present your work to faculty through both informal and formal channels. Cultivating relationships with allies across campus promotes a more holistic understanding of the student experience. The development of these critical relationships builds a strong bridge of respect that can form the foundation for an authentic and productive collaboration.

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INVOLVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Bring creative individuals to the table who understand the issues under consideration and are willing and interested in learning more. Be sure to include new voices who will question the status quo alongside seasoned veterans who can influence others beyond the working group. Bring the expertise you need to the table and listen deeply. If you are working with a large group, break into smaller subcommittees and match people who have different perspectives, so their feedback and conclusions will incorporate those distinct elements of difference. Encourage many voices, even voices you know might be negative at first, because garnering support from those individuals is extremely important.

FIGHT AGAINST THE SILO CULTURE

Unfortunately, we often work in silos where decisions are made in isolation of the larger university community. Sometimes this is by choice, but more often it is by default. Silos in higher education are problematic for students, because students do not compartmentalize their lives in the same way we organize ourselves into divisions and departments. Our students and their families expect student-centered support services and they do not care who provides them or which budget pays for them. They simply expect effective services that are easy to access, and when this does not happen, they may question whether they belong and, worse, whether they should consider enrolling elsewhere. Student attrition should be everyone's concern. When

we work in silos, we miss the opportunity to serve students holistically, a tradition in Catholic higher education. Catholic institutions are called to be attentive to the needs of students and deliver the highest level of care possible. We fail our students when our inability or unwillingness to authentically collaborate across divisions creates barriers that our students must work to overcome.

LISTEN TO STUDENTS

Creating a student-centered culture is the foundation for authentic collaboration. This can be done by engaging students in the conversation. Invite them into the dialogue by having student representation at every point in the process. This can take place as early as the idea generation meetings, all the way through the planning, marketing, and implementation processes.

BE PREPARED FOR THE FALLOUT

Change is hard. In higher education, change is often evolutionary rather than revolutionary, making rapid change even more difficult. Working in silos is conflict-avoidant behavior and complicates the ability of SA staff to foster authentic and effective collaboration among stakeholders. As SA professionals, it is helpful to become an expert in the relevant literature, review best practices at comparable institutions, and collect relevant data to support recommended changes. It is important to be strategic about how and when information is shared, because facts, rather than emotions, are often the most effective way to communicate change.

CONCLUSION

The authors highly value the collaborative relationship they have developed through their careers and through this initiative, but sustained change will not occur unless the collaborative mindset extends well beyond the individuals who initially fostered it. Innovation and creativity are necessary for our Catholic colleges and universities to thrive in such a competitive and volatile time in higher education. Creating departments with dual reporting lines, despite the complexity this creates for staff, budgeting, and technology systems, is an important step toward institutionalizing innovative change. Reinforcing our Catholic identity and values, by providing professional development opportunities grounded in community through collaboration between SA staff members and faculty members, is also essential. The Griff Center has been in place for two full years and issues continue to arise concerning who is responsible for what and how certain functions should be managed. From an administrative perspective, we continue to work to eliminate functional and cultural silos. From the student perspective, the Griff Center is a valuable, effective resource

where issues are addressed and problems solved in a “one-stop-shop.” Finally, institutional commitment to a student-centered approach must be deep and broad for collaborative initiatives to develop and succeed in lasting ways on campus.

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